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Literacy and Elementary Education in India

Emerging Issues and Policy Paradigms

by

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1. Introduction

There is indeed an unprecedented sense of optimism for achieving the goal of universal elementary education within a reasonably short time period, a goal that has eluded us for more than six decades. Where does this optimism come from? First, there is a general sense of satisfaction with the progress being made in extending access to all children through the flagship programme of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The optimism is further reinforced by the historic enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009. Consistent growth trajectory and the resilience demonstrated by the Indian economy during the recent global crisis has added to this sentiment by raising the clear possibility of mobilizing adequate domestic resources for the purpose. The successful generation of financial resources through the special levy on taxes has indeed demonstrated that possibility. This has been further augmented in recent years through mobilization of resources from external agencies. There is in fact a general feeling that finances would not be a serious barrier for progress in education. These developments are undoubtedly very positive. But, are we closer to the Education for All goals and will we be able to meet the 2015 targets set by EFA and MDG Declarations?

Unfortunately, despite this heightened optimism, India still ranks very low in the comparative measure of human development as reflected in the Human Development Index.[1] As of 2006, India ranked quite low (at 128th) in the Human Development Index (HDI), although it fared better in terms of the Human Poverty Index (at 62nd) (UNDP, 2007). Among other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka is far ahead of India in terms of the HDI (ranked at 99) and also ranks higher on other indicators which have a direct impact on the quality of life of children. (UNICEF, 2005: 98-99). This on the one hand, reinforces the assertion that 'growth in income is a necessary but not sufficient condition for human development.' On the other hand, it clearly points to inadequate progress made in other components of the Index including education development.

The Global Monitoring Report (GMR) on Education for All 2010 (UNESCO, 2010) also presents mixed a picture of the progress in educational goals. While it appreciates the rapid advances made by India in reducing the number of out-of-school children, India is placed in the group of 30 low education development countries with an EDI value of less than 0.80; these countries are described by the Report as being far from EFA goals and are likely to miss all or some of the 2015 EFA targets. (Table A.1, UNESCO, 2010, p. 279) This categorization by the GMR is indeed perplexing in view of Government as well as independent assessments (SRI-IMRB, 2005 ; and ASER 2006 and 2007) and national surveys (DISE, 2010 and 61st Round NSS, GoI, 2006) indicating to substantial progress in primary school participation of both boys and girls. The situation obviously calls for more detailed and disaggregated analysis of the various sub indicators determining the EDI, which are also equally important for the assessment of the education component within human development framework. Specifically one has to examine the progress made in the overall literacy rates and in provision of access to schooling in different parts of the country. We have also to examine the survival rates of children in primary and their eventual transition to secondary classes. Considering that our exploration is about improvement in quality of life, it is necessary to look beyond literacy and schooling linking educational development with early childhood care and imparting of vocational skills that create prospects for engagement of the young adults in gainful employment. Also, figures have to be disaggregated to reflect the situation in different states of the country as the average national figures may fail to capture the real progress made or the magnitude of the problem. The present paper attempts to analytically explore some of these issues. Drawing references from existing research literature and data sources, the paper discusses progress in literacy and elementary education in terms of policies, programmes and the actual progress. Specifically, the paper attempts to examine some of the following questions: Is the progress inclusive and equitable? Are there specific sections and regions that are still excluded from school education? What policies and strategies are being pursued to overcome persisting inequalities in accessing education? Does the education programme meet the expectations of the stakeholders? Does schooling equip the individuals with necessary knowledge and skills to access development resources and enjoy better quality of life? Are the investment polices contributing to reducing educational inequalities? In view of the adoption of elementary education as a fundamental right and the consequent enactment of the legislation making elementary schooling free and compulsory, the paper also explores the implications of this development for implementation of programmes of elementary education in the country.

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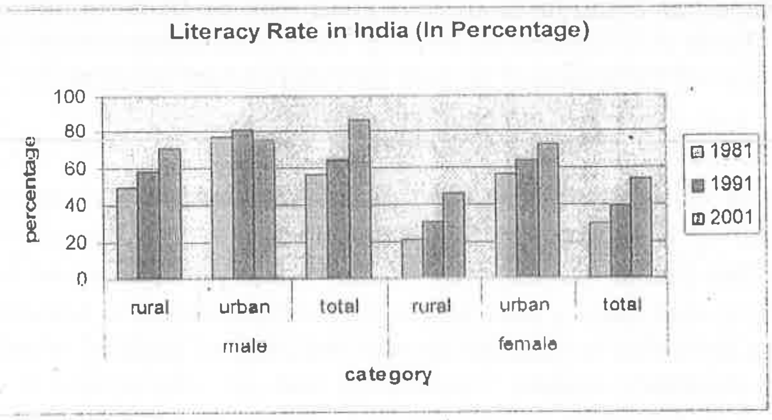
[1] The HDI combines three dimensions: (a) Life expectancy at birth, as an index of population health and longevity; (b) Knowledge and education, as measured by the adult literacy rate (with two-thirds weighting) and the combined *primary*, secondary, and tertiary gross enrollment ratio (with one-third weighting); and (c) Standard of living, as measured by the natural logarithm of gross domestic product per capita at purchasing power parity The HDI measures the average progress of a country in human development. The Human Poverty Index for developing countries (HPI-1), focuses on the proportion of people below a threshold level in the same dimensions of human development as the HDI - living a long and healthy life, having access to education, and a decent standard of living. By looking beyond income deprivation, the HPI-1 represents a multi-dimensional alternative to the $1 a day (PPP US$) poverty measure (see UNDP, 2007).

2. Adult Literacy is the most Basic Indicator of Educational Progress

India has witnessed remarkable improvement in adult literacy rate during the last two decades. The proportion of literate population of seven years and above increased to 65.2 per cent in 2001 from 52.2 per cent in 1991. The last decadal census in 2001 also indicated, for the first time, reduction in absolute number of illiterates in the country, thus signaling that educational progress has finally caught up with the population increase. Notwithstanding this improvement, India still accounts for around 30% to total illiterate population of world and 70% of these illiterate people are women. It is estimated that in India the Dakar target reducing illiterates by 50% by 2015 will be missed on current trends by around 81 million people. (UNESCO, 2010)

Figure 1: Literacy Rate in India 1981-2001 according to Census

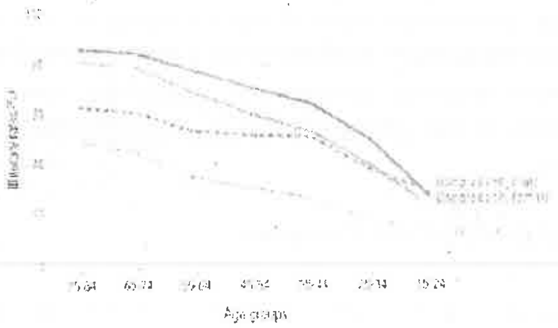


In addition to census data, NSS and NFHS also have indicated considerable increase in number of literate population. Between the years of NFHS I (1993) and NFHS II (1998), there has been significant decline in male as well as female illiteracy.

Gender disparities need special attention

The last two decades have also witnessed significant growth in female literacy rate (54 percent in 2001 as against 39.3 per cent in 1991). Gender difference in literacy rate narrowed down by 22 percentage point and Gender Parity Index gradually increased from 0.53 in 1981 to 0.61 in 1991 and to 0.71 in 2001. However, male literacy rate is still much higher than that of female literacy rate (Figure 1). While 49% of females and 26% males of age six and above were illiterate at the time of NFHS II, around 57% of females and 31% of males were found illiterate at the time of NFHS I. According to the 61st National Sample Survey (NSS) 2004-5, 81per cent of urban men and 69 per cent of urban women were found to be literate, which suggests substantial gender gaps in literacy rates according to location.

Figure 2: Comparing Literacy Trajectories in Bangladesh and India

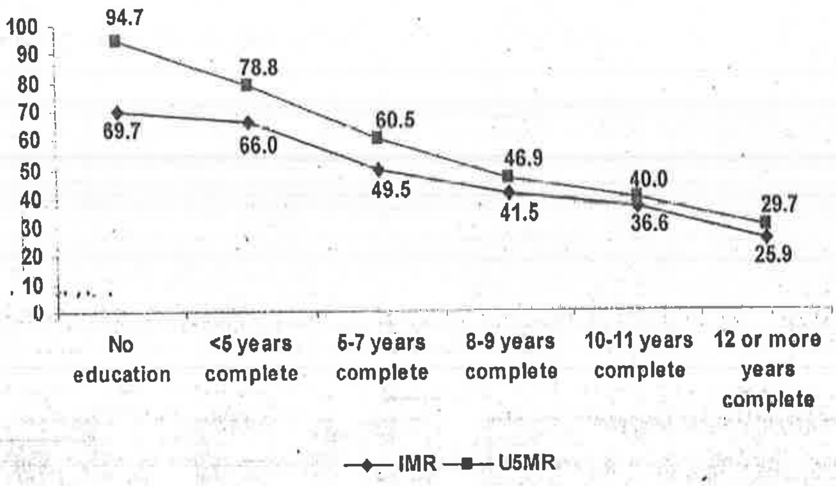


This persistence of gender disparity needs more careful consideration with regard to the strategies being adopted in the literacy programmes as well as the attention being paid to education of girls. Comparison of the situation in Bangladesh and India is quite educative. Gender convergence in adult literacy seems to be moving in different ways in the two countries. "Women aged 25 to 34 in Bangladesh have illiteracy rates 32% higher than men in the same age group. The gap reflects gender disparities that prevailed in the education system when that generation went to school. For 15- to 24-year-olds in Bangladesh today the gender gap has been eliminated. While India has been narrowing the gap, 15- to 24-year-old females are still about twice as likely to be illiterate as males in that group." (UNESCO, 2010, p.100) The comparison also illustrates the need for evolving long term goals as legacy of disadvantages cannot be overcome through short term project interventions, however efficient they may be.

Mother's literacy has multiplier effect

Education of both parents particularly mothers have positive impact on wellbeing of children and their education. The ASER study (Pratham, 2007: 5) found a strong correlation between parental education, particularly the mother's education, and children's education. It states that, 'educated mothers are more likely to send their children to school and to have healthier and better educated children'. An educated mother serves as a multiplier when it comes to educating her children. The study also found that: "Children of mothers who had not been to school were five times as likely to be out of school. The impact of mothers' schooling on the learning levels of children could also be observed. 6-8 year old children of mothers who had not been to school were three times as likely not to be able to read the alphabet as children of mothers who had completed at least Grade 5" (Pratham, 2007: 5).

Figure 3: Mother's Educational Level and Infant Mortality Rate
Source: NFHS III, 2007



The data from NFHS – III has also shown that mother's educational level has considerable impact on infant mortality rate (Figure 3) which is one of the key indicators deciding the overall human development of any country. Researches clearly point out that IMR is negatively associated with higher educational level of mothers. As would be discussed in a later section, attention to child nutrition and well being in early years make a very significant impact on their cognitive development and school learning.

Yet, despite such compelling evidence, neither the National Literacy Mission nor the ICDS have built a strong component of imparting literacy and other life skills among mothers of young children. It should be recognized that children and their well being including education can become a strong rallying point for the families, in general and for the mother, in particular with a truly multiplier effect on improving the educational level of the community.

Focus needed on traditionally backward states and regions

Independent India began its educational journey with a serious handicap as only around 18 per cent adults possessed basic literacy skills. The progress made since then is quite impressive but far from adequate if one were to disaggregate the data in terms of regional and sectional disparities and recognize that several successive generations got the opportunity to pursue school education. Thus, examining literacy status across the country indirectly reflects the efficiency and effectiveness of the school system that has grown multi-fold during the last six decades. The need therefore is to locate difficult areas and social groups that need special attention. Analysis of the data from 2001 census provides considerable insight into this issue. (Govinda and Biswal, 2005)

Figure 4: Share of illiterates (persons) in India 2001

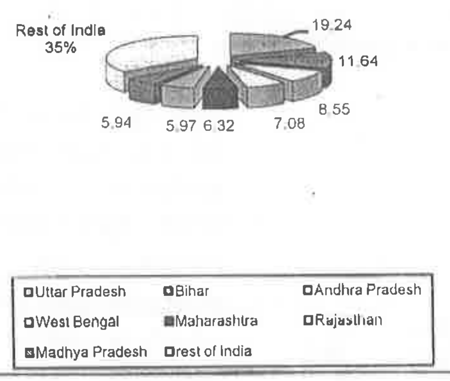
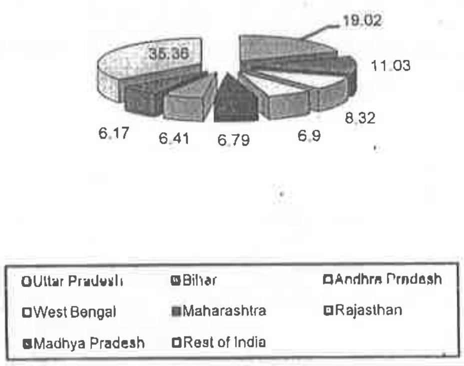


Figure 5: Share of female illiterates to total female illiterates in India 2001



As Figures 4 and 5 reveal, seven states carry the burden of two thirds of the illiterate population in the country. In fact 60 percent of the illiterate population is accounted for by the States of UP, Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh which had been among the nine states identified as educationally backward nearly three decades ago. Regional variations in literacy rate become more pronounced when analysis is done at the district level. According to 2001 census, around one-fifth of 591 districts[2] (i.e. 81 districts) have literacy rate equal to or less than 50%; most of the low literacy districts (26 districts having literacy rate less than 40%) are located in the states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh. In terms of absolute number of illiterates in 2001, sixty-seven districts in the country are having million plus illiterates, together accounting for 88.51 million illiterates. Further, female illiteracy rate is more than 50% (maximum of 81.51%) in 253 districts which together account for 54.51% of female illiterates in the country.

The variation in the literacy rate across social groups and household types is also very high. Analysis of Census 2001 and National Sample Survey data (61st round) reveals that the 7 states having around 65% of illiterates have high concentration of SCs and STs, and the illiteracy rates of agricultural and casual labour households are relatively very high. Besides, in most of the states, where female illiteracy rate is high, the percentage share of females in total agricultural labourers is also high. District level analysis also shows that the correlation coefficients among the number of illiterates, SC and ST population and the number of agricultural labourers are extremely high, positive and significant. (Table 1)

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[2] Census of India, 2001 has been conducted in 591 districts out of the total 593 districts.

Table 1

Correlations among illiterates, SC and ST population, and agricultural labour in India, 2001

(Based on district level records, N=591)

	Number of illiterates (persons) 2001	SC population (persons) 2001	ST population (persons) 2001	Estimated number of agricultural labourers 01
Number of illiterates (persons) 2001	1.000	0.711**	0.142**	0.750**
SC population (persons) 2001		1.000	-0.097*	0.524**
ST population (persons) 2001			1.000	0.212**
Estimated number of agricultural labourers				1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

How is the National Literacy Mission responding to the situation?

As mentioned earlier, bulk of improvement in literacy rates have to come by improved coverage through school education. Yet, literacy programmes which do not focus only on imparting basic literacy skills have a very important role to play. Further, the programmes have to target the locations and sections of the population which are traditionally underserved by school education facilities. The findings from data analysis in this regard are quite compelling. Yet, in the past, literacy efforts have got stalled or weakened when the real test of implementing programmes in backward districts or reaching the marginalized is to be addressed. Will it be better now?

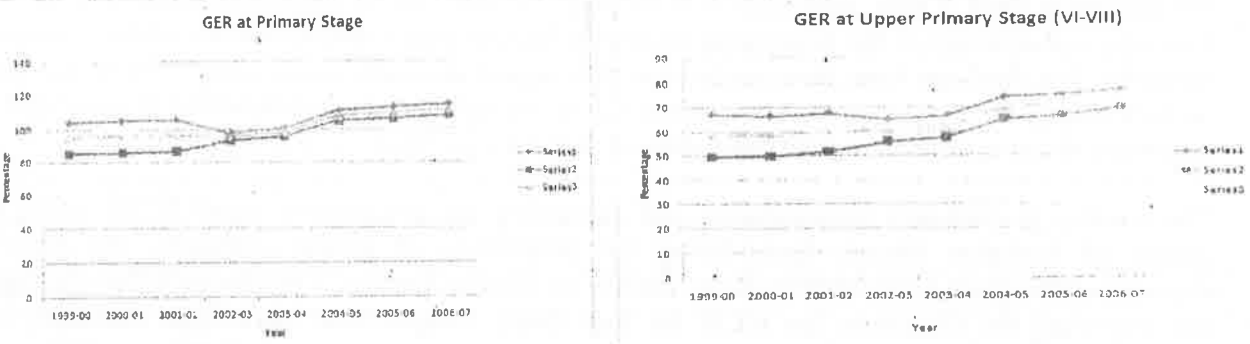
The country is currently reconfiguring and expanding the programme under NLM under the banner of Saakshar Bharat. Considering the persistence of gender disparity, the Mission objectives have been reoriented to focus mainly on female literacy. The eleventh five-year plan has increased the allocation for NLM by four times. Programmes have been redesigned to provide an integrated approach that combines initial literacy training with ongoing post-literacy courses. Decentralization is transferring authority to states and districts. Programmes under the Mission are to focus more strongly on women, low-caste groups and minorities. Commitments have been made to ensure that 85% of targeted beneficiaries will be women and that 50% will come from scheduled castes, tribes and minorities, with a focus on Muslims. These are undoubtedly positive steps. One has to wait and see if the Government succeeds in implementing what is in the proposal document.

3. Tracking Progress in Elementary Education

India's commitment to provide quality education to all its citizens precedes its International commitment to the Dakar Declaration of 2000. Almost all official policy documents, in particular the successive Five Year Plans at national level, acknowledge the centrality of education for economic growth and human development. The Tenth Five Year Plan document (GoI, 2002: 23) has emphasized the role of education as "a critical input in human resource development and is essential for the country's economic growth". Over a period of time, linkage of education with social wellbeing and human development has also been recognized as the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007:1) has described education as the "most crucial input for empowering people with skills and knowledge" and it further states, "Improvements in education are not only expected to enhance efficiency but augment the overall quality of life." In recent years, this has given way to adoption of a "rights perspective" as indicated by the declaration of basic education as a fundamental right of every citizen. In fact, excerpts from the Convention on the Rights of Children form part of the preamble to the recently constituted National Commission for Protection Child Rights.

On the quantitative side, the progress in the last two decades has been very impressive. The number of schools offering primary education has grown multifold; recent official data show that the number is more than a million. Number of children un-enrolled in the schools has fallen very sharply; again the latest count says that it is less than 10 million; an independent survey done in 2005 (SRI-IMRB, 2005) indicated that only 13.47 million out of a total of 194.03 million were out of school. The GER has grown consistently going beyond 100% in 2005 (Figure 6). Rapid increase in enrolment has also been reported by 61st NSSO data (GOI, 2006) according to which 83% boys and 77% girls of 5-14 years are currently attending educational institutions in rural areas, while around 89% boys and 87% girls, respectively are enrolled in urban areas.

Figure 6: GER in Primary and Upper Primary Stages



Source: Selected Educational Statistics, GoI, 2006, 2009 *(series 1= boys; series 2=girls; series 3= total)*

However, all sources of data point out that along with gender gap, social gap in school participation is persisting. Amongst all children, ST girls are the most disadvantaged group as only 53 per cent of ST girls could manage to get enrolled in school. They are also lagging behind their male counterpart as around 65 per cent ST boys were found enrolled in school. Thus a sizeable child population of SC and ST groups is not being able to attend school particularly in rural areas.

On the Policy Front: Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009

Enactment of the a law making free and compulsory education in the age group 9-14 a fundamental right is indeed a landmark event in the educational history of India. The Act effectively shifts the discourse on universalisation from provision to entitlement; from norm based and supply oriented planning to need based and entitlement oriented planning. The Act also introduces certain specific features which have the potential to transform the elementary education scene in a significant manner. First, the Act makes a beginning in explicitly delineating the responsibility of the State and the School management who are the two major actors involved in elementary school provision. Second, it attempts to define the entitlements of the child in terms of educational provision, independent of the kind of school the child is attending. This is done by setting benchmarks on what a school should consist of in the minimum. This is of very special significance as in recent years both in the Government and Private sectors, a large number of schools have come up with no basic facilities. The greatest pressure of this provision will be on the Government itself which has in recent years created many single teacher schools with sub-minimal facilities under the banner of EGS centres. Third, by specifying that every school should have a School Management Committee the Act recognizes the centrality of effective school functioning. This also recognizes the important role that the community and parents have to play in school management by insisting on majority membership for parents of children studying in the school. Fourth, with an eye on bringing greater equity in the school system, the Act sets up a fresh agenda for engagement with private providers. It avoids the traditional trap of treating the Government and the Private as adversaries and provides a framework for functioning as partners engaged in promoting a common public cause. Fifth, it lays down the ground rules for treating children in schools with dignity free from physical and mental harassment; creating all basic facilities particularly with an eye on the girl child. Sixth, it provides directions for adopting a child friendly pedagogy where children attend schools free from the fear of failing in examinations and being thrown out of the school. Finally, perhaps the most important implication of the Act is that as a law arising out of a Fundamental Right it gives teeth to the concepts of compulsory and free education; it designates the State to shoulder the responsibility and make the commitment justiceable.

The Act is yet to be notified. There is still a sense of skepticism whether the Government would really succeed in implementing the law in letter and spirit. There are, of course, several ticklish issues involved. Doubts are often raised if the Government will provide adequate resources to meet the requirements of the law. What if the Government does not allocate adequate finances? This is a legitimate apprehension. There is also the fear that the States which are already falling behind and where the action is needed the most may not fully take up the challenge? Perhaps the most intractable problem would be the provision of qualified teachers. Some states are already facing serious shortage of teachers; with the new teacher- pupil ratio specified in the Act, the demand will further go up. (This issue will be discussed in a later section of the paper.) Notwithstanding these problems of implementation, one has to accept that the Act opens up a new chapter in the country's pursuit of the goal of universal elementary education, a goal articulated nearly hundred years ago by Gokhale during the colonial period.

Dealing with exclusion from schooling[3]: Need for Differential Strategies

While the new Act foresees a situation in which there would be no child left out of the folds of schooling, the reality is that as of now a very large number of children do not have the privilege of benefiting from school education. But such children who fail to benefit from formal school education do not constitute a monolithic group. For some of these, school is genuinely outside their reach in physical terms. Some others fail to join school, even if it is available in the neighbourhood, due to social and economic reasons. Some join school, but never physically participate in the education process. Yet, some others leave school without completing even the lower primary cycle of five years. Some complete five years of schooling but do not move into the upper primary cycle. There are some who are officially on the rolls of school but precariously placed; they remain largely absent and are unable to benefit from the schooling process. There are also those who complete the lower primary or even upper primary schooling in physical terms but hardly benefit in terms of acquiring cognitive capabilities. It is obvious that one cannot place all these children in a single basket as failing to benefit from school. Thus, one could safely say that there is more to school participation than merely counting who is in or out of school. Different categories of children who are out of school would possibly be from different socio-economic background and bear different personal profiles, and interact with the school system in unique fashions. Understanding the underlying dynamics that defines this interactive process between the school and the child requires a disaggregated analysis of the phenomenon of school participation by different categories of children attempting to benefit from schooling under widely varying circumstances. Implementing the provisions of the Act therefore depends on the strategies that we adopt not only for ensuring that all children have access to schooling but also making that access meaningful by ensuring that all of them complete the full cycle of schooling and benefit from it by acquiring the knowledge and skills envisaged in the curriculum.

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[3] The concept of 'zones of exclusion' has been developed for studying the phenomenon of primary school participation under the project of the Consortium for Research in Educational Access, Transition and Equity. See for more details. See Keith Lewin, "Improving Access, Equity and Transitions in Education: Creating a Research Agenda", for an elaboration of the conceptual model on 'Zones of Exclusion'.

Access to School

As noted earlier, number of children who have no access to school or those who have never got enrolled in school is not large and the number is falling fast. What was around 29 million out of around 200 million children in 2002-03 came down to around 9 million in 2006, and has got further reduced in recent years. Demand for schooling does not seem to be a serious issue any more. Yet, those who are still unreached by schooling are those who are highly disadvantaged and we need special strategies to bring them into the school system.

The 55th and the 61st Rounds of NSS data reveal the there has been substantial improvement in the school participation level of children in the age group 5 to 14. However, despite this improvement, social group and location emerges as the two important markers – with the situation of both SC and ST male and female being much lower than other social groups. This is the case in both rural and urban areas. Thus, retaining girls and those belonging to marginalized communities (from Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Muslim minorities) – still remains a major challenge. Enrolling children from marginalized groups such as working and street children, children living in urban slums and remote rural habitations and migrant children in school is also an uphill task. The SRI-IMRB survey reinforces the issue observing that 10% of out-of-school children were Muslims, equal number of ST children and a slightly higher number of SC children were out of school. Altogether, these three marginalized groups accounted for 52% of all out-of-school children.

Table 2: Out-of School Children by Social Groups

Categories	Out-of-School Children			Percentage Out-of-School Children		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
All Children (6-13 years)	11353597	2106137	13459734	7.80	4.34	6.94
SC Children	2706025	398841	3104866	8.55	6.25	8.17
ST Children	1585833	71145	1656978	10.11	4.21	9.54
Muslim Children	1567717	685535	2253252	12.03	7.17	9.97

Source: SRI- IMRB Survey, 2006; also referred in Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008).

In addition to above categories, the SRI- IMRB report (2006) estimated that around 38 per cent of disabled children are also out of school; special measures are needed for such children ranging from appropriate school infrastructure to special training for teachers, and provision of suitable learning material, aids and appliances etc.

In order to improve access more schools in specific areas may have to be opened; several schools with only lower primary classes may have to be upgraded to provide for full cycle of elementary schooling. Opening of schools has till now been addressed in an ad hoc manner often ending up with appointing a para-teacher teaching in a single room establishment with practically no academic support facilities. If one adopts the entitlement framework, this approach will have to cease. Every school will have to have the minimum infrastructure as well as academic and human resources specified in the RTE Act. The implications will be far reaching. It would necessitate doing a more systematic school mapping exercise so that the access is not just to lower primary classes but also to upper primary classes; further, the location of facilities will have to take proper note of equity considerations that would help overcome both distance and social barriers.

Absenteeism, Failure and Dropout

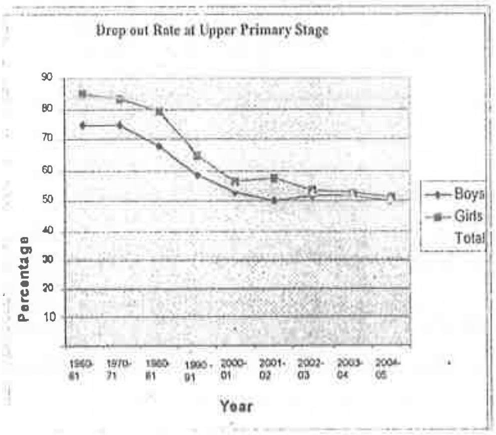
The journey of a child through the age-grade ladder of the formal school is a complex one punctuated by a number of barriers. While some succeed in traversing the course successfully several seem to lose out at various points and for a variety of reasons. These are summarily discarded as school drop outs.

Table 3: Dropout Rates at Elementary Level (I-VIII)

Year	All Categories Children			SC children			ST children		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
2001-02	52.9	56.9	54.6.	58.6	63.6	60.7	67.3	72.7	69.5
2003-04	51.85	52.92	52.32	57.3	62.2	59.4	69.0	71.4	70.1
2004-05	50.49	51.28	50.84	55.2	60.00	57.3	65.0	67.1	65.9
2005-06	48.67	48.98	48.80	53.68	57.12	55.17	62.88	62.86	62.87
2006-07	46.44	45.22	45.9	51.56	54.98	53.05	62.78	62.22	62.54

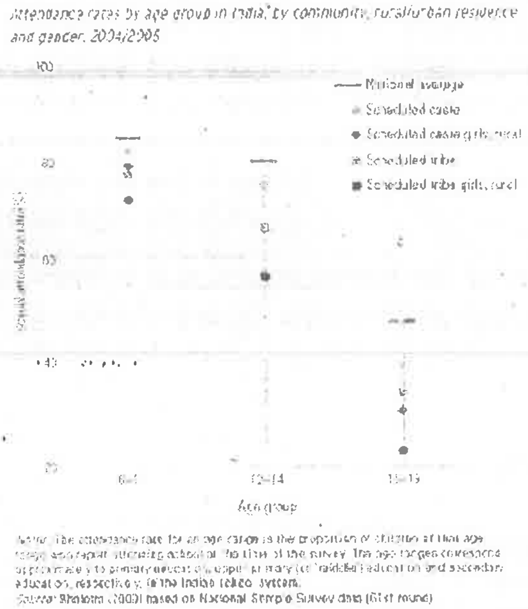
Source: GOI, 2009

Figure 7: Drop out Rate at Upper Primary Stage



The drop out rates at elementary level (Table 3) is quiet high as around 50 per cent of children who get enrolled in class I fail to complete the full cycle of 8 years elementary schooling. In case of SC and ST, the proportion is even higher. More girls than boys are found dropping out from SC community while the drop out rate is more or less same for boys and girls in case of ST communities. Almost all data sources indicate that dropping out of school among older children of 11-14 years is much higher compared to those of lower age group. (See Figure 7) It is, however, encouraging to note that drop out rates for girls belonging to all categories, including SC and ST have declined steadily at the upper primary stage during the period from 1990-91 to 2004-05. Yet, the data also suggest that the drop-out rate for girls continues to be much higher than that for boys among both SCs and STs. On the whole, it appears that that the development programme carried out in education have not been able to make a significant impact on the participation behaviour of children as the drop out rates seems to have almost become static during the last 4-5 years.

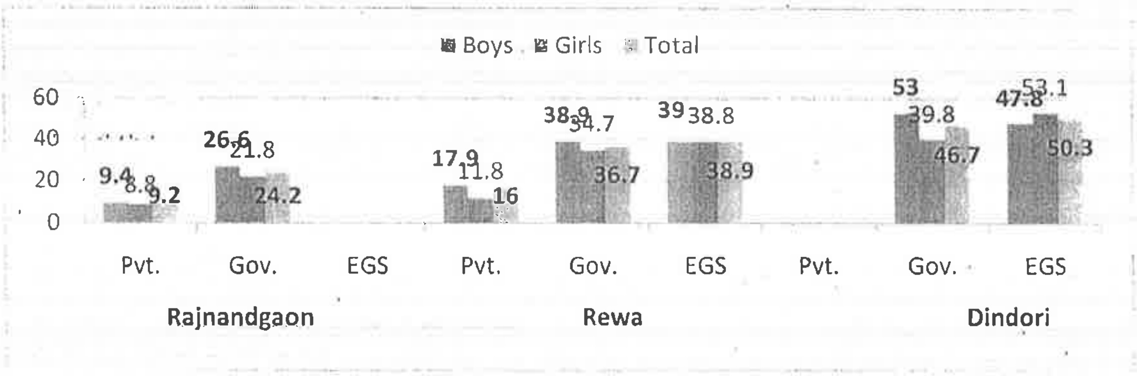
Figure 8: Attendance rates in India (Source: EFA-GMR 2010)



Some household surveys have explored the reasons for dropping out of school. Why do children drop out? According to NFHS 1998, 32.6 per cent of boys and 28.4 per cent of girls cited 'lack of interest in studies' as the reason for dropping out from school. The NSS Survey of 1998 too has recorded 'child not interested in studies' (24.4 per cent), 'unable to cope with or failure in studies' (22.5 per cent) as the predominant reasons for children dropping out of schools. The PROBE Report (1999), like the NFHS, 1998 and the NSS, 1998 surveys also found 'lack of interest in studies' as the main reason for dropping out of school. These groups of reasons, which relate to lack of interest among children or not interested in studies essentially signify school related factors acting as barriers for children to learn effectively and to move further in the ladder of education.

What are these school related factors that cause children to drop out? There are no systematic studies to ascertain the actual nature and extent of causes. However, studies indicate two factors that lead to poor learning among students and eventually forcing them to leave the school. First of these is 'student absenteeism'. Schools do not clearly record absenteeism among students, however in a recent study done in rural areas of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh revealed high levels of absenteeism among students. (see Figure 9). It is obvious that any child who remains absent for more than 2-3 days at a stretch is likely to lag behind and eventually fail to follow the transactions in the classroom. Unfortunately, the phenomenon is not even fully recognized as a serious problem, leave alone devising strategies to deal with it. Teachers, parents, and even administrators seem to take it as normal feature of rural life not realizing that such children would sooner or later will leave the school unable to benefit from the happenings therein.

Figure 9: Percentage of Students absent on the Day of the Visit to Schools (N=88)



A second factor observed in schools particularly in rural areas is high proportion of repeaters. This is indeed intriguing since most Indian states follow the policy of continuous evaluation accompanied by automatic promotion. The teachers, however, seem to think differently as they tend to interpret the policy as 'no examination' policy. Consequently, children are detained in the same class in the name of failure or repetition which is partly caused by irregular attendance and poor learning levels but mostly due to indifferent attitude of the teachers towards effective learning by all students. The whole issue is further aggravated by substantial levels of teacher absenteeism in many schools.

The Right to Education Act attempts to address the latter problem of student failure by insisting on automatic promotion coupled with continuous evaluation and feedback. In fact, the model rules formulated in this regard lay down detailed guidelines to ensure adherence to these principles and practices. Advocacy for continuous evaluation is not new. But will it be taken more seriously this time as it forms part of a legislation? Monitoring this clause is indeed a difficult task with the poor supervisory and support system in the country.

Every school is important: enhanced focus on school functioning

As the data from official records indicate, the task of getting children into school has been fairly successful in recent years. It is therefore, necessary that the *attention in the coming years has to shift from enrolment to improving the functioning of schools and enhancing the quality of their outcomes*. In fact, in the existing framework of SSA two components are specially focused on individual schools, namely, school specific grants provided to each school and individual teacher grant is also offered. However, these components have remained largely isolated from the overall concern for improving quality of every school in a holistic manner. It is difficult to know if these have cumulatively transformed the school or classroom teaching of teachers. It is worthwhile, that these interlinked investments in schools are viewed from a long-term perspective of improving the quality of every school. *The goal has to be that all schools change – change for better.* In reality, there are schools that are improving and those that are not. Without careful monitoring and follow up, the scheme of school and teacher grants would remain mere spending propositions without any consolidation and a clear understanding of what cumulative impact they could make on school functioning.

Global experience shows that overall improvement in quality of education can be achieved more effectively if individual schools are holistically targeted for improvement in terms of their management and performance. In other words, such support to schools have to be designed internally for each school and the initiative should be at the local level. Financial support to schools should be linked to preparation of holistic plans for school improvement. This could be effectively implemented making use of the process of political and administrative decentralisation unfolding in many states. PRIs and other grassroots level bodies such as School Management Committees and VECs could be involved in preparing such plans and receiving funds for elementary education.

The RTE Act precisely suggests for such an approach by mandating that every school will have a School Management Committee. The Act also specifies that financial grants to any of the schools supported or run by the Government would be contingent upon the proposals made through a School Development Plan. Individually viewed, the funds transferred through this process to the school level may not be very large. However, cumulatively they are to be the means of transforming the existing schools into qualitatively superior schools. Further the Act assigns the responsibility of monitoring the functioning of the schools to the School Management Committee and the local authority, implying that the local community would play an important role in developing the school and ensuring that the school functions effectively. In fact, some states such as Karnataka have legislations in place for establishing such school level bodies and the experience, in general, has been very encouraging. Further, bringing the focus on individual school, the Act mandates that teacher-pupil ratio be maintained as specified in the Schedule in every school. This is in contrast to the currently prevalent practice of computing the ratio for whole district or state, masking the real imbalances that characterize teacher provision in individual schools.

Slow progress among the marginalized: Need to Prioritize Equity

Indian Constitution prohibits any kind of discrimination based on caste, class or creed and provides special positive discrimination measures to offset the social, education and economic disadvantage historically inherited by certain groups. Yet, even though considerable progress has been made during the post independence period, deep seated caste-based prejudices continue to influence practices in different spheres of life including education. Macro level statistics clearly indicate that belonging to a scheduled caste or tribe lowers prospects of school participation. Being a girl and living in a rural area brings a further layer of disadvantage. In 2004/2005, just 57% of rural girls aged 12 to 14 from scheduled tribes and 66% from scheduled castes were in school, compared with a national average of 80%. Distance to school is also a determinant of participation by ethnic minorities. Children from scheduled tribes, many of them living in dispersed communities in remote areas, face very long treks to schools. (Wu ct al., 2007).

But lowered participation of the marginalized groups is not a statistical issue. Field studies point to the fact that several school factors add to the social dynamics that continue to thwart effective participation of children from marginalized groups as gender and social hierarchy in Indian society seem to determine the access and participation of children in educational institutions (Ramachandran, 2002; and Jha and Jhingaran, 2005). Most often, gender, caste, poverty, and location act as nesting factors that result in exclusion of children from school (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2008). Children from religious minority groups also face exclusion from schooling. Although proportion of Muslim population is 13.43% to total population percentage share of Muslim children is 10.5% at the primary level and around 8.5% at the upper primary level. Some researches (for details see Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2008) have also examined the relationship between social background and educational marginalization and further interventions to be made to reduce the social gaps in schooling. Sivanandan (2005) found that there is a wider disparity in school enrolment; like the proportion of scheduled caste girls to all scheduled caste children in school is 36 percent whereas the corresponding figure for forward caste is 48 percent. Low enrolment of marginalized groups is evident even in the state like Kerala with high literacy rate. Further, "Even in state like Kerala where the literacy is almost 90 percent the enrolment rate for scheduled tribes male is 75 percent for male and for female it is 50 percent. In states like Orissa the enrolment for Scheduled tribe male is 37 percent and female is 26 percent." A study by Kaul (2001) in Karnataka involving a sample of 93 schools has also shown that access to primary education and its quality, retention and drop-out rates are ruled by and related to prevailing caste, class and gender divides in the region.

The analysis shows that further progress in UEE depends to a great extent on how we address the issue of social disparities in educational access and barriers to effective participation in the schools. The implication of this assertion is that the currently adopted generic strategies of promoting access and participation for all needs to be replaced by a more nuanced and differentiated strategy that directly targets the marginalized groups. This indeed seems to have been recognized at the policy level. Fro instance, the Annual Report of MHRD in 2006-7 asserted that "Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan resolutely targets geographical areas in districts and blocks with predominance of SC, ST, OBC and Minority population in the matter of allocation of funds and school infrastructure to promote education of those who have been deprived of educational facilities so far. 369 such districts have been identified as special focus districts for targeted interventions under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. This includes 61 districts with high SC population, 106 districts with high ST population, and 88 districts with high Muslim population. Over 3000 blocks with low female literacy and highest gender gap called educationally backward blocks (EBB) have also been identified to focus on girls' education." Even though policy documents refer to such strategies actual field level unfolding of the programme in different states does not effectively reflect this perspective. It is obvious that without a proactive stance by State governments, it may be difficult to address the issue. However, one would hope that the situation would change as RTE demands that individual child entitlement be the concern of all development actions.

It is also observed that exclusion of marginalized groups happens also due to in-school barriers and discrimination which impacts retention and learning. "Dalit or SC children suffer from the stigma of being at the bottom of the social ladder, and some groups among them are still considered untouchable. They face issues of overt and covert discrimination within the education system. Tribal children have language and cultural backgrounds very different from the mainstream, and face exclusion on this count. In this context it is also useful to mention Muslim children who have religious and cultural backgrounds different from the majority, and face alienation on this count. Issues of stereotyping and stigmatizing children from certain communities as being difficult to retain within the system persist." (Government of India, 2010). This demands innovative actions at the field level for appropriately sensitizing teachers and school authorities. This should also become part of the monitoring framework which otherwise focuses only on collecting quantitative figures from schools.

Apart from fine-tuning the programme strategy at different levels to offset the inherited legacy of disadvantage, the financial strategy also needs special attention in this regard. (This issue will be discussed in a later stage.)

Addressing Imbalances and Inequities in teacher provision

Fast expansion of institutional facilities has resulted in tremendous increase in demand for qualified teachers. This demand for more teachers will continue as more children join schools, more children complete lower primary grades and move on to higher primary and thereafter to secondary classes. Lowering of pupil teacher ratio under the RTE Act is bound to add to further pressure on the teacher supply front. However, the situation with respect to demand for additional school places and the consequent need for additional physical infrastructure and teacher supply is not uniform across different states. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have experienced declining trend in child population and this would cause decline in demand for school places and teachers at the lower primary stage; but even in these states, there will be a demand for school place and teachers in near future, particularly at the upper primary stage. On the other hand, some states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh West Bengal, Assam, Orissa do not have adequate number of teachers even with the ratio of 1:40 and would therefore demand additional teachers in very large number. Some states especially the East and the North Eastern States face a serious situation with a huge proportion of teachers without any professional training. Added to this is the fact that several states have created many small schools with single teachers; equipping them with minimum national norms of at least two teachers per school would demand more teachers.

According to the recent estimates, there are 523,000 posts of elementary school teachers vacant in the country with large inter-state variations. Uttar Pradesh has 1.65 lakh teacher positions vacant, followed by West Bengal with 52,764 vacancies, Bihar with 51,074, Orissa with 37,901, Chhattisgarh with 34,985 and Rajasthan with 29,356 posts vacant. There are also large intra-state variations, especially between rural and urban schools, in the deployment of teachers. In some states there is a problem of excess teachers in urban schools and serious shortages in rural areas, particularly in remote and difficult to reach villages. Efforts made to undertake redeployment are often thwarted due to interference from influential quarters or due to pressure of teachers' unions or due to lack of rationale and transparency in the exercise. The first step to rectify the situation is to adopt a well designed programme of redeployment of teachers within each State. This has to be coupled with quick recruitment of teachers for the existing vacancies. Estimates prepared by NUEPA and MHRD for implementation of RTE Act provisions show that it would require the appointment of 5.1 lakh additional teachers over and above the existing vacancies of 5.23 lakh (GOI, 2010). However, this estimate may undergo a change once the States undertake the redeployment process and calculate the exact requirement of additional teachers for each school.

The problem of teacher supply is compounded by the imbalances in the capacity of teacher professional training in different states. While some States lack adequate capacity, some others have the problem of official abandonment of teacher professional training requirement for becoming elementary school teachers. For instance the existing capacity of teacher preparation in Bihar is not likely to meet the demand of teachers fro replacement of retiring teachers on annual basis. On the other hand, some of the southern states have over supply of training capacity. While over supply in some parts of the country can be attributed to market forces, the State has to bear the blame for not creating adequate capacity.

The issue of teacher supply is not only of numbers, it also has to deal with the quality of teachers and the potential of the policy to build a strong cadre of professionally equipped teachers. Unfortunately, many states in their search for the means of reducing the financial burden on the state exchequer, have recruited teachers on contract basis. Though this may reduce the cost it would also invariably dilute the quality as talented, qualified and trained young population will not be interested to join as teachers because of low payment, poor service condition and low status. Government statistics reveal that Government schools in 2007-08 had 14.10% of para-teachers, their numbers being as high as 49.44% in Jharkhand, 36.89% in Uttar Pradesh, 34.44% in Jammu & Kashmir and 28.82% in Orissa. These are the states which are also facing the problem of low enrolment, high repletion and drop out in addition to poor teacher supply and high PTR.

Another major issue in teacher supply relates to the existence of small schools with subminimal facilities. According to the Report of the Working Group on Elementary Education and Literacy for the 11th five Year Plan, 417,000 schools which account for 54% of all primary schools have only one or two teachers. The number of primary schools with three or less number of teachers is as high as 549,000 (71.5%). Coupled with this is the problem of small enrollments, as already discussed, which poses additional problems in raising the quality of infrastructure and human resources in primary schools. However, teacher training programmes, unfortunately, have continued to be oriented towards mono-grade teaching situations. Teaching-learning materials used in these small schools are also not geared to teaching in multi age and multi-grade settings. The situation obviously demands special effort to examine how essential such small schools are and then to ensure that teachers working in these schools receive proper orientation on the pedagogy of teaching in such contexts and conditions. In fact, additional academic infrastructure has to be provided for functioning effectively in such conditions.

The RTE Act requires maintenance of specific teacher-pupil ratio in every school. This is in contrast to the computation currently made which consist of average figures for States and districts. The Act also through the accompanying rules discourages appointment of teachers without adequate qualifications and on appointment of teachers on contract basis. However, the situation demands major structural reform in the teacher recruitment and teacher education systems if good quality teaching si to be made accessible to al children.

Engaging with the Private Providers: Need for a new Perspective

As per DISE, 19% of all primary school enrolments and 20% of all upper primary enrolments are in private unaided schools. Given that DISE does not cover all private unrecognized schools, this percentage is likely to be even higher. Among the States visited by the 11th JRM, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu have more than 25% of their primary enrolments in private unaided schools. Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan also have a high percentage of their upper primary enrolment enrolments in private unaided schools. (Government of India, 2010) In fact, the share of private providers at upper primary and secondary level is even higher. However, at least at the lower primary level, majority of students are still attending government run schools or schools managed by local bodies.

The recent phenomenon of mushrooming of private schools has been well documented by several studies. Karthik Muralidharan and Michael Kremer (2005) conducted a survey of rural primary schools in India in 2003 and found that 28% of the population of rural India were accessing fee-charging private schools in the same village. Nearly 50% of the rural private schools in the sample had been established 5 or fewer years before the time of the survey, suggesting rapid growth in the number of private schools. Further studies show that private schools are more common in areas with poor public school performance; richer states are less likely to have rural private schools. Private school teachers are 2 to 8 percentage points less likely to be absent than teachers in public schools and 6 to 9 percentage points more likely to be engaged in teaching activity at any given point in time. They are more likely to hold a college degree than public-school teachers, but much less likely to have a formal teacher training certificate. Children in private school have higher attendance rates. They have higher test scores, even after controlling for observable family and school characteristics. Many other researchers (Tilak and Sudarshan, 2001; Kingdon, 2005; Juneja, 2005; De et al., 2000) have also found increasing participation of private providers in provisioning schooling facilities.

Data from 61st NSS indicates that girls particularly in rural area are mostly availing government school while much higher proportion of boys is found attending private schools in urban area which indicates boys get preferential treatment as far as investment on education is concerned. Parents prefer boys to send private unaided school and they are ready to pay for that. Thus, for achieving gender and social equity, improvement in quality of government run schools is absolutely necessary to ensure successful completion of elementary education of majority of children who are girls and children mainly from poor and disadvantaged group.

Analyses of studies in this regard bring out two important issues. First, in common discourse, private-Government divide is generally linked to issues of quality in schooling. The common perception is that private schools are better in terms of quality in comparison to their Government counterparts. However, the quality issue has gradually transformed it self into an issue of gender and social divide in education. This divide is further exacerbated by wealth divisions. As a recent UNESCO Report on EFA (UNESCO, 2010) points out educational inequalities in India have begun to mirror wealth-based inequalities with the richer going to private schools leaving the Government schools to deal with the poor. In fact, being born into the poorest 20% significantly raises the risk of falling below the four-year threshold. In almost half of the countries including India, the incidence of four-year education deprivation among the poor is double the national average (UNESCO, 2010, 140).

India's wealth divides in education are among the largest in the world – and they are reinforced by regional and gender disparities. While the richest 20% average over eleven years in school, the poorest have an average education expectancy that places them just above the four year 'education poverty line'. Poor rural females are well below that line. According to a recent estimation, India ranks 65 with the school life expectancy (Average years of schooling of adults by country[4]) of only 5.1 years while in richer countries like USA, Norway New zealand etc. the school life expectancy is of 12 years. It becomes much lower for poor people. For instance, the average poor rural woman aged 17 to 22 in Bihar averages fewer than two years in education (UNESCO, 2010). Thus, time spent in education is one of the most important determinants of life chances in all societies. There is no internationally agreed benchmark for education deprivation similar to poverty thresholds. However, people with fewer than four years of schooling are unlikely to have mastered basic literacy or numeracy skills, let alone built a foundation for lifelong learning. Those with fewer than two years are likely to face extreme disadvantages in many areas of their lives. Of course, learning achievement ultimately depends as much on the quality of education as on time spent in school. But the four year and two year thresholds are bottom lines that could be treated as indicators for 'education poverty' and 'extreme education poverty', respectively (UNESCO, 2010, 139).

This nexus between private-Government divide with social and gender disparities on the one hand and wealth based divisions on the other, has never been adequately addressed by educational policy makers in India. Government has generally remained a silent spectator to the deepening schism in the education sector. Private providers do not even have to get their establishments registered as education institutions. Government has no supervisory oversight in most States on private unaided schools. On their part, private providers have remained aloof to the Constitutional ideals of equity and integration. Rather protagonists of Government and private sectors view each other as adversaries. There is an urgent need to create a shared public space in education treating Government and private schools as complementary delivery systems working for a common cause. This would require change of perspectives and readiness to restructure themselves on both sides. In this regard, insistence of the RTE Act to involve the private schools in delivery of free education could mark a new beginning in engagement of the private and the government schools sectors. How would this evolve over a period of time is something one has to wait and watch.

Schooling without Learning is a Burden on the Children

It has increasingly been realised that education with sufficient quality can only effectively fulfill the human development agendas and therefore provision of quality schooling is gaining importance in educational discourse across the globe. Recent researches (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2007; Ramirez et.al., 2006; Temple 2001) have suggested that quantitative expansion of education must be accompanied with qualitative expansion otherwise people may fail to get the expected benefits of education which has far reaching impact on socio-economic development with serious policy implications. While definitions of school quality may vary, there is no gainsaying of the fact that 'learning' is at the core of all definitions. Viewed from the angle of children and parents, the very purpose of school participation is defeated if children fail to learn the basic knowledge and skills as envisaged in the curriculum.

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[4] http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/edu_ave_yea_of_sch_of_adu-education-average-years-schooling-adults

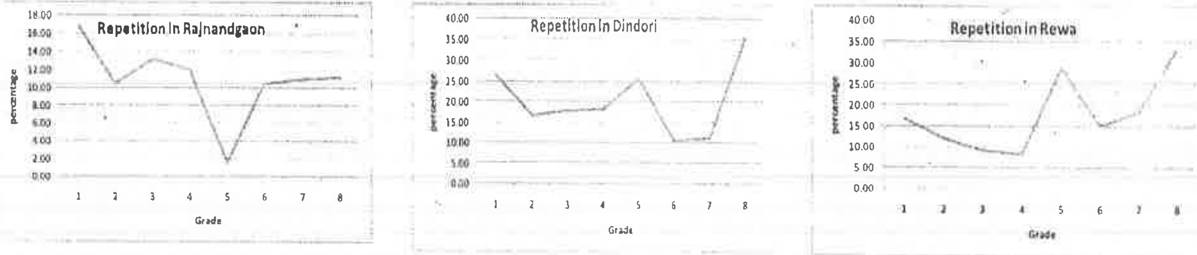
Increased emphasis laid on assessment of student learning outcomes in recent years has to be seen in this context. Assessments of learning outcomes in recent years in India, as in many other countries, show problematically low and/or unequal levels of learning among different sections of students indicating close association between quality and equity. It is not unusual to have large numbers of children complete the primary school stage in class IV or V without being able to read or write fluently or do simple arithmetic computations. ASER 2006 (Pratham, 2006) indicated that half of all children in the country begin lagging behind in class I and continue to lag behind in the achievement of expected competencies in classes III and V. What is even more disturbing is that several states which have been doing well in enrollment and participation lag behind when it comes to quality of learning. It was found that around only 70% of students could recognize alphabets and around 40 % could not read level I and II texts. Around 40% children could not do simple mathematics of classes I and II as well as of classes III-V. In rural India, levels of learning are equally troubling. In 2008, just 28% of grade 3 students could subtract two-digit numbers and only a third could tell the time (Pratham, 2008). Invariably all studies on learning outcomes show that more than fifty per cent students despite attending the full primary cycle do not acquire even basic reading and writing competencies. These studies also show considerable variation in learning achievements across schools and across social categories which should be a matter of concern as it would significantly erode the gains in access and equity, if not addressed simultaneously.

Considering that quality of learning also critically depends on what is transacted in the classroom as much as how it is done, there has been increased attention paid to the issue of developing relevant curriculum for school education. In this regard, the massive national level consultation carried out by NCERT towards preparation of the National Curriculum Framework, 2005 needs special mention. It is envisaged that the new National Curriculum Framework along with corresponding syllabi and textbooks would become the guiding documents for State level organizations to work towards revising their curricula and syllabi.

Needless to emphasize that quality of learning depends mainly on the functional efficiency of the school: Can it retain the children for the whole cycle? Do they progress smoothly from one grade to another? Are they getting adequate instructional time to learn every day? Recent data indicate while around 93 percent children get enrolled in schools, only around 30% stay on to complete 5 years of schooling; and around 50% drop out without completing the compulsory education period of 8 years. One of the main reasons emerging from field surveys is that possibly children begin to lag behind academically from the early grades and consequently fail to progress to higher grades and eventually drop out of school by the end of or during the primary stage.

In fact, a core question being raised is whether poor quality of schooling has become the cause for continued midstream drop out of children from schooling and eventual illiteracy and incapacity to pursue productive life in their adulthood. An empirical study of 88 schools also reveals the high repetition rates that are prevailing across the regions at the primary as well as upper primary level (Figure 10). It should not surprise anyone if many of these repeating children drop out sooner or later without completing the elementary cycle.

Figure 10: Grade wise Repetition in three Rural Clusters
(Source: CREATE Project, NUEPA, 2008)



One may argue that expanding the system by opening adequate number of schools and through creation of basic infrastructure facilities has naturally remained the top priority for planners and policy makers. This indirectly led to diminished attention to quality dimensions of schooling in the early decades of education development. While this is understandable, SSA has in recent years have been referring to quality enhancement as its main goal. The main message emerging from the analysis for policy makers is that merely providing inputs that ought to improve quality does not guarantee real enhancement of learning outcomes. SSA has to devise more direct strategies for changing the way schools functions and classroom transaction is organized. Many studies have found missing teachers or insufficient time being devoted to actual teaching learning as common features of many schools. It is time that the Government policies look into such real issues of teaching learning instead of merely supplying inputs.

4. Look Beyond Schooling to Achieve the Goal of UEE

There is no doubt that enormous attention has been paid to elementary education in recent years. SSA has succeeded in creating significantly enhanced awareness among the public as well as policy makers on the need to devote more resources on improving the elementary education provision. However, simultaneously, there is increasing evidence that Central and State Governments have to devote adequate attention to certain linked areas even though they may not directly fall in the purview of elementary education if the efforts have to yield more sustainable results. A few of these areas that demand urgent attention of educational policy makers are highlighted in the following.

Care in Early Years determine the limits for benefitting from schooling

Increasing evidences from the field show that malnutrition limits the capacity to learn by drastically affecting the motor, sensory, cognitive, social and emotional development of children. Vitamin, calcium and iron deficiency affects functioning of the brain. Iodine deficiency, in particular, can drastically affect the mental development of children. (EFA Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2010; also see EFA GMR, UNESCO, 2008) Alderman et al (1997) found that an improvement in nutrition improves enrolment and cognitive development.

Recent international estimates suggest that about 19 million infants – 14% of all newborns – are delivered with low birth weight (UNICEF, 2008). More than half of these births take place in

South Asia: over one in four of the region's children are delivered with low birth weight. These children face a heightened risk of early mortality: low birth weight is an underlying factor in 60% to 80% of deaths in the first month. They also face longer-term risks of disadvantage in health and education. Low birth weight is strongly associated with loss of years in school and poorer cognitive skills (Victoria et al., 2008), which undermine the potential benefits of improved access to secondary education. Many of the 8.3 million Indian children born with low birth weight will carry a burden of disadvantage with them into primary school. Moreover, almost half of all children under age 3 in India are underweight for their age, pointing to far deeper nutritional deficits (UNESCO, 2010, p.44).

The share of malnourished children is higher in India than in other countries in South Asia, and substantially higher than the world average (UNICEF, 2005). India is home to 19% of the world's children and every year another approximately 26 million children are born. A large number of these children struggle to survive with limited access to adequate food, proper hygiene, shelter and health care facilities, and this can lead to their exclusion from the education system as it is widely acknowledged that, schooling participation of children is largely influenced by the nutritional level and health condition of children. Despite this strong evidence, the recent report of NFHS III (2005-06) indicates that the levels of child malnutrition remain high and little progress has been made in reducing the proportion of underweight children over the past seven years, namely between NFHS II (1998-99) and NFHS III (2005-06). Around 49 per cent children from rural areas are reported to be underweight while 38 per cent of children under three are stunted (too short for age), 19 per cent are wasted (too thin for height). Further, 74% of children under the age of three and around 95% of adolescent girls suffer from anemia caused by iron deficiency, which has serious impacts on learning capacity (UNICEF, 2004). According to NFHS III, the proportion of malnourished children of under the age of three has increased to 79%. Iodine deficiency, which reduces learning capacity by about 13%, is likely to be widespread, as according to NFHS-2 (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2000) over 30% of households were found using salt without iodine. Experience shows that the situation can be changed as malnutrition can be reduced by providing supplementary nutrition and health facilities. In India, supplementary nutrition is given to children below 6 years of age through the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), initiated by the Government of India. Despite this programme, poor nutritional level of children is a major concern and because of cultural norms and existing gender relations, girls have more chances to be neglected as compared to boys. They account for a larger proportion of malnourished children and many of them under threat of being severely malnourished even in the years of adolescence and early youth that affects their not only cognitive development but also chances of survival at the time of child birth.[5]

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[5] Malnutrition continues to be a significant problem for children and adults in India. While there have been some improvements in the nutritional status of young children in several states, nutritional deficiencies are still widespread. Most striking has been the increase in wasting, or weight for height, among children. NFHS-3 found 19% of children wasted, up from 16% seven years earlier. At the same time, there has been virtually no change in the percentage of children who are underweight (47% in NFHS-2 and 46% in NFHS-3). NFHS-3 also found a remarkably high prevalence of anaemia-79%- in children age 6-35 months. (Source: http://www.nfhsindia.org/summary.html, March 2007)

Research also suggests that good quality early childhood education programmes can yield significant short and long-term benefits, particularly for children from underprivileged backgrounds. Although Early Childhood care and education has gained more attention in recent years in India but so far, only a handful of eligible age group (around 15% only) of 0-6 years could get access to pre-school education.(Table 4)

Table 7: Enrolment in Pre-Primary Schools
(Source: GOI, MHRD, SES, 2004-05, 2006-07)

Year	All categories			SC			ST		
	Boys	**Girls**	**Total**	**Boys**	**Girls**	**Total**	**Boys**	**Girls**	**Total**
2004-05	2494441	2267044	4761485	302842	276143	578985	409453	385300	794753
2005-06	2755544	2508509	5264053	335511	303569	639080	427101	409181	836282
2006-07	2864783	2501557	5366340	379572	335905	715477	441531	412697	854228

The policy implication from the discussion above is that 6 years which is the formal age of entry to primary education may be too late to act. Deficits in health and nutritional care in early years of development would have already predisposed the children in their cognitive development in such manner that they do not fully benefit from schooling. Cognitive deficits may be long lasting to affect their academic growth. This indeed is a serious matter for educational progress as official education establishment in the country has continued to consider early childhood care and education as not their responsibility. Interestingly, the RTE Act makes reference to preschool education but does not make it mandatory for the State to provide the services. Can we move ahead in achieving the goal of quality elementary education for all, which includes effective learning by all children, without improving the early childhood care support systems in the country?

Education of Adolescents and Young Adults help break the vicious Cycle

Illiteracy, lack of productive skills and poverty effectively seals the possibility of exploring new avenues of livelihood for the young, perpetuating the intergenerational trap of poverty and poor or no education for the household. This is not a small phenomenon. Education of young people of age group of 15-24 years has, of course, received increasing attention in the country during recent years. Yet, high levels of non-enrollment and drop out from school has resulted in large number of young people who have either never attended school or have dropped out without completing the full cycle of elementary education. No one can deny the fact that this section of population will sooner or later enter the world of work as unskilled labourers. Apart from these young people, there are those who despite availing educational facilities find themselves unfit for employment opportunities due to lack of specific vocational skills. All these young men and women are likely to become parents of children who are not likely to fair any better if the family conditions do not improve through appropriate skill building education.

Unfortunately, Indian education system has not adequately addressed the issue of imparting vocational skills. Consequently, proportion of young population with vocational education is abysmally low. In India, only 3% of rural youth and 6% of urban youth have had any kind of vocational training (India Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2006; India Planning Commission, 2008). There is little evidence that they enhance employment prospects. The image of technical and vocational provision as a form of second-class education that provides limited benefits for employment remains largely intact (UNESCO, 2010, p.7). The country's Industrial Training Institutes and various craft centres are not accessible to the vast majority of the poor. India also has some of the world's largest reported gender disparities in technical and vocational education, with girls accounting for just 7% of enrolment at the secondary level and their courses heavily concentrated in traditional areas such as nursing and sewing. Governance problems have also hampered India's efforts to strengthen vocational education. Responsibilities are split among the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, other national bodies and state authorities. Duplication and fragmentation are widespread, there is little control over quality and the certification system is poorly understood by employers. Companies and employer organizations are only marginally involved, though efforts are being made to strengthen their engagement (UNESCO, 2010, p.86). In view of all these problems which have contributed largely to non participation of young people in vocational education, Planning Commission has emphasized that "along with the development of education, the Eleventh Plan shall mount a major initiative on skill development and vocational training, in a mission mode. The innovations required in the institutional set-up have been identified."

The value of building productive skills among the young should not be viewed only for its impact on the economic conditions of the individuals involved. Rather it should be valued for its long term effect on the next generation of children; it would ensure better opportunities for education for the children of these young adults. But merely depending on the small number of technical institutes or on the revival of vocational streams in higher secondary schools will not help. Rather, the country has to formulate innovative strategies. It is important to recognize the cyclical value of providing appropriate educational inputs to young adults on impacting schooling behavior of their children.

Address the Problem of Child Labour More Effectively

Links between child labour and educational access have received much attention over the last two decades. Nearly 20 years ago Myron Weiner pointed out that 'Primary education in India is not compulsory, nor is child labour illegal. The result is that less than half of India's children between age six and fourteen – 82.2 million – are not in school' (Weiner, 1991: 3). In quantitative terms, the situation may have improved during the last two decades. Burra et al (2006) also refers to a substantial decrease in the number of child workers, alongside an increase in school enrolment and a reduction in the percentage of out-of-school children in some states, including Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In contrast, along with improvements to enrolment, the percentage of child workers in Himachal Pradesh increased from 5.5% in 1991 to 8.6% in 2001. Yet, large numbers of children continue to languish as child workers instead of attending school regularly. According to Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data conducted by UNICEF (2004: 57), there are more than 12 million child labourers in India.

Based on the variety of work contexts in which children are engaged in labour, Burra et al (2006: xl) argue that 'the circumstances under which children work in any number of activities gives the lie to the view that work is a form of socialization into adulthood.' This is also supported by findings that work conditions do not leave scope for children to pursue schooling even on part-time basis. A time-use study conducted in Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya throws light on to the kind of activities in which children aged 6-14 years are engaged (Hirway, 2002). The survey points out that while 67.1% of children surveyed were engaged in educational activities, about 17% were engaged in purely economic activities. MICS data from 2000 referenced by UNICEF (2004) also throws light on child labour and school participation in different states. One of the main reasons for the high prevalence of child labour in these areas is the burden of debt, which forces families to send their children to work, combined with low literacy rates (UNICEF, 2004: 6061).

Whether poverty is the cause of child labour or not, experience and evidence indicates that it is the children of poor parents who face difficulties in attending school because of child labour. The persistence of child labour is therefore also linked to the conditions under which adult labour is organized. Kaushik Basu and Pham Hoang Ban (cited in Sinha and Reddy, forthcoming) argue that 'if parents had higher wages or better employment prospects, children would not be sent to work'. As a result they argue that the Government should focus on improving the adult labour market in order to have an impact on reducing the child labour market. Sinha and Reddy also argue that 'only those policies, which aim at altering modes of exploitation and the division of labour directly, would result in the reduction of child labour'.

Education Departments cannot sit quietly for the adult labour conditions to improve. If child participation has to improve, child labour problem has to be tackled. As many observers point out, every child not attending school is most likely to be involved in paid or unpaid labour. The classification of occupations as hazardous and non-hazardous have only exacerbated the issue by legally allowing for engagement of children in labour. It has to be seen if the RTE implementation will help address adequately the problem of child labour which in one way or the other restricts the freedom of the child to pursue full time school education and other accompanying activities.

Create convergence with other development initiatives such as NREGA

Education development cannot be achieved in isolation of seen in isolation of other development activities. Achieving convergence with other agencies providing other services could go along way in ensuring sustainability of gains achieved in the education sector. It is in this perspective that the guidelines of SSA state: "The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan will not disturb existing structures in States and districts but would only try to bring convergence in all these efforts. Efforts will be made to ensure that there is functional decentralization down to the school level in order to improve community participation. Besides recognizing PRIs/ Tribal Councils in Scheduled Areas/ including the Gram Sabha, the States would be encouraged to enlarge the accountability framework by involving NGOs/ teachers, activists/ women's organizations etc." Such convergence not only ensures cost effectiveness in implementation of programmes but also help minimize duplication and overlapping of activities. In fact, it creates synergy in action at th field level and also bring a sense of ownership by the local community and other development actors in the field. Further engaging with such programmes as implementation NREGA helps develop interface with the marginalized groups and allows for more targeted action for education; similar benefits will flow from coordinating with programmes such as ICDS and capacity building of PRI functionaries.

Even though the guide lines encourage such convergence, in reality, school education programmes work in isolation of other social development activities as well as non-government actors in the field. For such convergence to come it is essential to reform the basic design of the programmes such as SSA creating space for actors from other development agencies and departments.

Investment has to increase and be better targeted

In general, experts consider that India is not investing adequate financial resources to provide quality education for all (Dreze and Sen, 1995; Tilak, 2004) as reflected in the trend of financial allocations made for elementary education through Annual as well as Five Year Plans. More than four decades ago, Kothari Commission called for enhancing public expenditure on education to 6% of GNP. Since then here have been repeated calls by experts, committees and in national policy documents, for greater public expenditure on education. Yet, in reality, this figure has hovered around three per cent. Though there has been increase in share of elementary education (50 per cent) to the total educational budget, it seems inadequate to achieve the goals of UEE. From a larger economic perspective, as Sen (1992: 42) puts it, "The social backwardness of India, with its elitist concentration on higher education and massive negligence of school education, and its substantial neglect of basic health care, has left the country poorly prepared for a widely shared economic expansion" The rate of increase in investment in education has been very slow over the last sixty years as the proportion of GNP invested in education has increased from about 0.72% in 1951-1952 to about 4% of GNP in 2001-2002.

Education was made a part of the Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2004 and one of the promises made was to increase government spending on education to at least 6% of Gross National Product (GNP), but this has remained an elusive target. According to the Human Development Report (UNDP, 2004), India ranks at number 78 in terms of share of public expenditure on education in Gross National Product (GNP), out of the 137 countries on which data is available. Notwithstanding this low investment, the situation is changing gradually over the years along with the changes in international scenario as well as national priorities. It has been realized that without concerted efforts and enhanced spending universalisation of elementary education will remain an elusive goal and educational inequalities will widened.

But the issue is not confined to the level of spending. It is even more important to ensure hat the money is invested rightly so that the progress is equitable and sustainable contributing to cumulative change in the field reality. In other words, it demands that a well thought out design for investment is drawn at the national level. Seen against this on three issues emerge very clearly. First, why have we been unable to reduce interstate disparities? Way back in 1980, some States were identified as lagging behind in UEE; surprisingly the situation remains more or less the same even now. Second, it is more than 15 years ago that the country adopted districtwise planning and funding under DPEP. The process continued under SSA. This meant that some of the districts have received development funding for more than 15 years. In fact, some of the early receivers of such funding were in relatively better developed states such as Kerala, Karnataka and Haryana. To what extent has this impacted the elementary education scene in these districts in a cumulative fashion? Why have we not moved to an altogether new agenda for action in these districts? It is difficult to explain why these districts are also subjected to the same set of planning parameters and norms as other districts under SSA. The third and more difficult issue is that of social inequities. Considering that the Constitution recognized the historical necessity of affirmative action one would have expected that the marginalized groups received special consideration in the planning process. Again, surprisingly, except for some specific schemes targeted at girls and SCs and STs, SSA has adopted a generic and pan-national normative framework for funding. It is in this perspective that Jhingran and Sankar have recommended that there is a need to bridge the disconnect between the 'real investment needs' of the districts reflected in their status of educational development *and* the actual financial allocations made on an annual basis under SSA. The actual expenditures are often lower in educationally and socially disadvantaged districts, which further depresses the per child investments in these districts. SSA aims at achievement of 'equality of outcomes' in terms of enrolment, retention and achievement of children across all regions of the country and between gender and social groups. To achieve equality of outcomes between regions and social groups that have very different baselines or starting points, it is crucial to ensure that much greater attention and resources, among other measures, are targeted towards areas and groups that have remained educationally backward, often an account of state neglect.

SSA seems to have taken corrective measures in recent years. Before 2007, equity played only a limited role in determining resource allocation. District population size was the main criterion used in estimating need. A new formula attaches more weight to social indicators, including a district-level Education Development Index. In 2005/2006, the differences in per child allocation between high and low Education Development Index districts were negligible, but in 2008/2009, districts in the lowest quartile on the index received twice as much per child as those in the highest quartile (Jhingran and Sankar, 2009). This suggests that two policy reforms in spending are critical to progress further. One is that regional disparities have to be adequately recognised and investments in different States and districts should be based on the principle of redistributive fiscal transfers and not one of a standardized yardstick for all. Second, we have to prioritize social equity in spending patterns. This demands more targeted transfers in place of generic support mechanisms which seem to be the principle currently in operation. Obviously such fundamental changes in funding pattern which may involve positive discrimination in favour of traditionally backward states, which are often also considered as poorly governed states involve politically tough decisions. This may also be viewed by well performing states as a sort of disincentive. But without making such a tough choice the goal of UEE may continue to elude.

Conclusion

The adoption of Right to Education Act is undoubtedly a landmark event with the potential to radically transform basic education provision in the country. Until now, the Government of India was engaged in implementing predetermined set of activities and providing norm-based inputs in a project mode to improve elementary education. Implementing the RTE Act demands that this is replaced by a programme perspective that has stability and continuity in administrative and operational arrangements. Also, it would become inadequate to show progress in utilizing funds and meeting project targets. The real test of the progress will lie in the way the schools function in meeting the educational needs and entitlements of every child.

But, not everyone in the country is convinced that the Government has the wherewithal to fully implement the provisions of the Act. The central issue involved in implementation is that of monitoring the institutions of education delivery at the end point and ensuring that the entitlements of the children guaranteed by the Act are delivered in letter and spirit. Considering that currently largest number of schools are under Government control, it carries the burden of proving that it is capable of delivering the child entitlements with sincerity. But with the poor record of running good schools, it will be difficult for the Government to take on the task of overseeing with any moral authority all the schools, many of which are administered by non-state bodies and may be working more efficiently. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that in most states the school inspection system has been virtually dismantled. It would therefore require that the State Governments create additional supervisory structures and mobilize financial and human resources to take up the task of implementation monitoring. This is definitely a tall order expectation in many states. How can the Government deal with this situation? We have to make an honest and speedy choice. One possibility would be that the Government sheds some of the responsibilities of directly managing schools by transferring that responsibility to NGOs and other non-state volunteers. This would for instance mean relieving the burden of recruitment and management of huge number of teachers for the currently Government run schools. Such a move will create opportunity and time for State professionals to focus on policy making and monitoring the implementation process by unburdening them of routine school management work. To strengthen the monitoring process, each State could also establish with support from the Central Government, an independent professional body for evaluation and monitoring of school functioning on a regular basis. Indirectly by giving over the task of teacher management to individual schools established by non-State bodies, teacher accountability systems can also be put in place in a more meaningful and sustainable manner.

Another area which is critical for successful implementation of RTE is the way financial sharing between the Centre and the State Governments is managed; even within a State how the fund flow is targeted to overcome inequities. Addressing this would require as highlighted earlier in the paper, reforming the current pattern of fiscal transfers which is standardized and rigid across the States and proactively moving towards an approach of redistributive fiscal transfers. In other words, instead of having one pattern of financial sharing such as 65:35 between the Centre and States, it will require a differential need based sharing pattern. This will have to be coupled with prioritizing social equity in targeting funds within each state. While this may involve designing a more sophisticated approach to funding, without such an approach, whole regions and historically disadvantaged groups would, in all likelihood, continue to be left behind.

These suggestions whether related to changing the nature of involvement of the State in managing schools or regarding the adoption of a differential pattern of sharing of finances between the Centre and the State Governments would require serious political engagement for consensus building. Mere consultations among the Central and State bureaucracy as is being done currently under SSA will not suffice. The process may prove to be difficult but that is what the situation demands.

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